

North Kildonan United Church

17th January 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Follow Me”

I Samuel 3: 1-10

Psalms 139:1-6. 13-18

John 1: 43-51

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

It's a common enough phrase heard most places these days – *"Follow me."* Follow me on Facebook, follow me on Twitter and so on. But since I have neither a Facebook nor a Twitter account, any invitations for me to follow someone go nowhere.

In today's gospel we heard a much more substantial invitation. Jesus is in Galilee, where he meets Philip and invites him to follow Jesus. And so begins the work of discipleship.

In this comparatively brief yet theologically packed passage we discover much about how John's gospel understands who Jesus is.

We are still in the first chapter of this gospel and think of what has been written up to this point.

The gospel begins with the declaration that the Word, that is Jesus, has been with God from the very beginning of creation. At the appropriate time, this Word, in the words of the gospel, became flesh and lived among us. As vs 18 says: *"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."* This is as close as John gets to the mystery of Christmas, and perhaps it is a helpful companion to the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke.

I know that Christmas is past, though the occasional tree rests in pizza shop windows, as I saw recently on one of my walks, and perhaps you are still discovering needles stuck in your carpets. But before the Christmas season becomes a distant memory, I want to share with you a blog that William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop in the United States, wrote a few years ago. It does speak to the understanding that the Word took flesh and lived among us at the right time.

He writes: *"A Christmas story, can't remember where I heard it, but I tell it to you as you begin your own celebration of Christmastide.*

There was a time when all the angels where gathered about the heavenly throne for a discussion. Things were in a mess down on earth. (What else is new?). The Creator had become concerned about the state of the Creation-wars, fighting, famine, bloodshed all over.

"I've tried everything," God complained. "I have spoken to them some of the most beautiful words they could ever hope to hear. Think of the glorious Psalms, the hymns, the poetic passages of Isaiah. They love to read about peace and goodwill, but they don't like to live it!"

God continued, "Then I sent them the prophets. They love Isaiah, the promises of release from their sufferings, freedom from their exile. But do they follow the precepts of the prophets about justice and righteousness rolling down like waters? Never?"

There was widespread discussion of the sad state of affairs on earth. Many of the Angels – Gabriel, Michael and others had been on earth on many an occasion. They had seen for themselves the sources of God's lament and shared God's concern.

"I think the only thing left is for one of you, a member of the heavenly court, to go down to earth. Live with them, not just for a moment, but every day. Get to know them, become one of them, live with them, let them get to know you. Only then will heaven's intent be truly communicated to them.

Only then will they take notice of the great gap between the way they have been living and the way they were created. Only then will we be able to reveal to them who I created them to be."

The angels stood in awkward silence. They had been to earth before, to deliver messages from God or to effect some momentary intervention in human affairs. They weren't about to volunteer for long term duty in such a murderous, difficult place.

The silence lasted for an eternity. Finally, God broke the silence. Quietly, determinedly, but without resignation and no bitterness, God said, "Then I will go."

This is a parable of Incarnation."

"The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The gospel continues with John the Baptist first preparing the way for Jesus, and then baptizing Jesus. After his baptism Jesus begins the task of inviting people to become his disciples. Andrew and Peter were the first to find in Jesus that which they were looking for and they did not hesitate when Jesus invited them with the words *"Come and see."*

Always, always, the invitation from Jesus, follow me, come and see.

In today's gospel Philip and Nathanael also respond by following Jesus. In just a few sentences the gospel writer has Philip and Nathanael lay a theological groundwork for understanding that this Jesus is not just another teacher with some interesting ideas. Jesus is the promised one, the Messiah, the longed for saviour, linked to Moses and beyond.

Tom Wright, one of the great biblical scholars of our day, has written a fresh translation of the New Testament that brings out more fully the essence of this passage.

He translates it this way.

"Philip came from Bethsaida, the town where Andrew and Peter hailed from. Philip found Nathanael.

"We've found him!" he said. "The one Moses wrote about in the law! And the prophets too! We've found him! It's Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth!"

"Really?" replied Nathanael. "Are you telling me that something good can come out of Nazareth?"

"Come and see" replied Philip.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him.

"Here he comes", he said. "Look at him! He's a real Israelite. Genuine through and through."

"How did you get to know me?" asked Nathanael.

"Oh", replied Jesus, "I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip spoke to you."

"Rabbi", replied Nathanael, "you're the son of God! You're the king of Israel!"

"Wait a minute" said Jesus, "Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You'll see a lot more than that! In fact, I'm telling you the solemn truth. You'll see heaven opened, and God's angels going up and down upon the son of man."

We gather this day, in our own homes, as people who have heard this gracious invitation and have accepted the challenge, the opportunity, to be disciples of Christ, followers of the One who is our way, our truth, our life.

The life of discipleship takes many forms. The Iona community, source of many excellent hymns in Voices United, sings of the new life and new promise we daily receive in our own life of discipleship. How might we exercise our discipleship the hymn asks? I invite you ponder these words as Christ speaks to us this day.

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

*Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?

Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?

*Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?

*Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

Christ, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

Amen

(Voices United #567)